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Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the longtime Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, is by most accounts an extremely charming and capable man. But his social grace and diplomatic skill failed him the other day when Tim Russert of NBC News' Meet the Press questioned him about the Saudi government's connections to terrorism.

Mr. Russert was particularly tough on the Saudi royals' support, both inadvertent and deliberate, for terrorists. He brought up, for example, a recent Newsweek story reporting that U.S. investigators are concerned about "suspicious" banking transactions between the Saudi Embassy in Washington and charities, clerics and students suspected of terrorist activity.

And he aired jaw-dropping video of a Saudi government-sponsored telethon that raised \$92 million for Islamic suicide bombers who blow up Jews in Israel and the territories it occupies. As Mr. Russert said to the ambassador, "You're having telethons raising money for Palestine suicide bombers, and you sit here and say, 'How could people say these terrible things about us?'"

An increasingly exasperated Prince Bandar either denied the accusations or said they were part of the pre-Sept. 11 past. But Mr. Russert reminded him that the telethon occurred in April 2003 and that a May 2003 report of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** found that official Saudi textbooks teach children extreme hatred and intolerance of Jews, Christians and Muslims who choose to reject the faith.

Prince Bandar's remarkably ineffective cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof display showed how increasingly difficult it is for the Saudi royals to put on a credible happy face for public consumption here. After such an evasive performance by Riyadh's man in Washington, should anyone be surprised if the American people consider Saudi Arabia part of the problem rather than part of the solution to the scourge of terrorism?

Yet in the end, the Saudis hold the trump card: Oil-dependent America can't do without them and their cheap crude. That, and the depressing fact that the only alternative to the Saudi royals are the Wahhabi imams, means that unless the United States gets serious about developing alternative energy sources, we're stuck with these double talkers.